

Sensitivity to the Learning Needs of Newcomers in Foreign Language Settings

Ana Maria Klein

This article focuses on the instructional needs of newcomers to our North American classrooms who already speak one or more foreign languages and who are coping with classroom-related language issues. It taps into positive instructional strategies that are culturally-validating and welcoming for these students. Inspired by an invited Oxford Round Table presentation in the United Kingdom (Klein, 2007), it also explores the concept of field-dependence/independence, which is a culturally-based mode of learning influenced by culture and parenting style.

Immigrant English language learners who reach us from various countries bring a wealth of languages, traditions, humor, and skills to our classrooms. As their teachers, we need to harvest and expand this potential in order to embrace these students. In the long run, this will also enrich our classrooms.

Viewing the instructional needs of English Language Learners (ELLs) in this positive manner creates a paradigm shift for us as teachers and changes the direction of our instruction. Past generations of teachers attempted to unitize, mainstream, and channel these students' talents and abilities to fit a standard or norm.

Today, within our second language instructional formats, we are looking at other ways of including these students. Hence, classroom instruction is now focused on inclusive and equitable settings. Within this article, I will offer insights on how to create these inclusive and equitable learning environments.

In an attempt to liberate teachers to explore the creativity of ELLs, and in order to create more inclusive learning settings for them, I suggest reaching out to them and finding out how their culture operates.

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Once in our classrooms, we forget that our ELLs typically arrive in our learning settings with a strong first-language base and rich cultural experiences. Yet they are too often over-looked, silenced, and devalued before they can manifest themselves as capable, informed, and productive learners.

Creating a Level Playing Field

To harvest their potential it is always important to make ELLs feel welcome in our classrooms. One way to do this is to mediate and negotiate toward a level playing field of communication. This might be attained by finding a standard with which to communicate and by eliminating all of the possible filters and road blocks they might have.

This desirable flow of communication can include body language, sign-language, interpersonal synergies, even a friendly and appreciative gesture toward the language learner. Simply expressing our effort toward communication can suffice. With a friendly gesture the needs of both interlocutors could be met and opportunities for sufficient exchange can take place, initiating that sought-after first contact. However, without this communication, often that initial effort can be severed and never re-established, leaving both interlocutors disconnected.

A minuscule derogatory body or facial expression could also happen and be misinterpreted. At this sensitive point in time, an uncalled-for comment or suggestion could become a harmful weapon that could close this communication thread. We need to be wary of such expressions as grimaces, looking the other away, or simply being dismissive. These are clearly socially constructed, idiosyncratic of particular cultures, and could be dangerous communication breakers. The same is true for removing eye-contact or interrupting

the thriving interlocutor. We do not teach enough about these disconcerting learning barriers that can add insult to injury and discourage language learners.

Field Dependent or Independent

In terms of eye-contact, for example, there are various culturally-driven modalities uncovered by current research. While working with children, we know that they can either be field-independent or field-dependent. This dependence is culturally-acquired. A field-independent learner is usually from an Anglo-European cultural base. This learner is self-regulated, organized, and methodic. The field-independent learner takes a cue from the instructor and evolves solely on his own throughout the instructional episode.

The field-dependent learner, conversely, has been brought up to listen and watch more capable peers, elders, and care-givers for cues. This field-dependent learner will be at the instructor's elbow, constantly seeking advise, direction, and support. Being dependent or independent, however, does not impact the quality of the learning, but only the manner in which instruction should be delivered.

Several cultural groups have been defined as field-dependent learners. In my teaching environment, for example, these culturally-based realities reflect the Hispanic and Native-American cultures that surround me. I work with a large population of Latinos who hail from Mexico and Puerto Rico. Western New York, where I teach, is also the home of the Seneca Nation, a group of Native American people who are proud of their heritage, written language, and tradition.

Within these cultures, parenting is equated with group-interaction and reflects a need for acknowledgement or approval from elders or more-capable peers. Instructions from the teacher are not acted upon

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unless a non-verbal cue or sign of approval is given. Another interesting instructional aspect is the recitative/repetitive teaching format used by Hispanic educators. As the instructor repeats the command, the learner rehearses it in his/her head prior to acting upon it. Repetition/recitation is also built into the manner in which the language is spoken.

I also work with African-American students, and while these students are not ELLs or newcomers, it is interesting to note how this population is habituated to a call-response communication format. This dialogue has its own rhythm and rules. People not familiar with it might find it too out-going, even offensive or rude. However, with sufficient exposure to its “hip-hop/rap-style” intonations, one soon becomes attuned to the format. To describe this form of dialogue briefly, questions are posed, interlocutors bounce them back and forth several times, almost like musical interactions. They then communicate and reach a consensus only to begin this recitative interaction again and again.

Instructional Shortcomings

Historically, there have been many powerful, successful, and useful instructional procedures for teaching a language. These strategies build on techniques, technologies, and highly innovative ideas for promoting effective language interaction. Upon close examination, however, the cultural aspect has too often been excluded or shortchanged.

Perusing texts or video recordings, I have found iconic cultural inserts that are stereotypical representations of people communicating or at work. These images represent cultural manifestations in an unauthentic way and also create a serious communication barrier for a learner who might self-identify with these flawed representations.

It should not be surprising if the ELLs in question feel culturally excluded, minimized, and invisible due to the inaccurate renditions and portrayals of their culture. For example, I usually ask my students at the university why we represent French people with a *baguette* in their hands, Mexican people with a large *sombrero*, and Italians eating *pizza*?

Why do we continue to misrepresent immigrant populations? I am sure they could be more accurately described as skilled, modern professionals who are highly-trained individuals and who bring

positive experiences to their new country. As immigrants seeking to learn a second or other language, they have already survived much in their past. These learners have already fended for themselves in highly complex settings where survival depends on a very keen sense of awareness and understanding.

Some bring a unique profession or skill from the homeland, others have owned and operated businesses, and all have survived major upheavals in their lives. The fact that they have left their previous homelands to begin a new life in the United States does not give anybody the right to undermine or underestimate them. I strongly object to such a deficit orientation toward immigrant people.

Sadly, however, host country interlocutors stamp immigrants with disapproval and too often fail to make an inventory of the skills and competencies they bring. This self-fulfilling prophecy typically dooms immigrants to educational failure and second-class jobs. This deficit orientation also affects entire families. The children of immigrants are often excluded from the culturally integrative practices they are entitled to. They would fare much better if the hosts were more cognizant of the culturally rich contributions immigrants provide.

Interlocutors, translators, interpreters, and cultural brokers should be made available to immigrants to assist in creating and expanding a natural thread of communication that would integrate newcomers and their families more effectively.

However, we must not create these welcoming forums in derogatory or dismissive ways. Honesty and wisdom should dictate our choices so that we begin to display our best dispositions toward immigrant families, and avoid token welcome expressions and void/valueless communicational invitations masked in platitudes.

Examining Instructional Methods

In terms of instructional methods, I find too many artificial procedures being used today that are totally ineffective. Despite the fact that they are presented in appealing folders, books, and kits, they remain ineffective. They contain laboratory exercises, video-recordings, and promising results which get language learners nowhere. Why? The culturally accepting element is missing.

As these culturally-deficient instructional systems endure, they offer quick language acquisition processes that are

almost impossible to attain. For one, the instructors speak at an unnatural pace. Next, the situations are artificial. Third, the examples are not life-like. And, finally, the opportunities for spontaneous language interaction do not exist.

I include within these instructional formats appealing yet also ineffective television programs that present learning episodes and situations for the viewer. Other instructional programs offered through popular media include highly methodic language acquisition processes that are cumulative. Again, these are ineffective. Why? They do not consider the true needs of the immigrant learner. They do not harness the learner's interests and attention. They do not appeal to current immigrant situations. They all seem to be token situations that are not life-like or even possible. The language learner is isolated and bereft of the possible cues and opportunities for participating in and engaging with speech acts that create and promote communication.

Spanning the last few decades, methods that support positive learning experiences for second language learners include more opportunities for language experience, dialogue, and language immersion. Some of these methods include *total body-response* ideas as well as *total immersion* and opportunities for social interaction. Many methods use a lot of scenarios for students to respond to, to act on signal, and to relive social situations, as well as opportunities for role-playing.

What I find sorely missing, again, is that the scenarios, opportunities for responses, dialogue, and role play are still very artificial! No one has consulted with a cultural specialist to understand what these instructional approaches represent to the student. No one has explored the body-language and how it might not be conducive to role play, language articulation, and discourse. No one has brought up the issue of turn-taking in conversation, eye-contact, and body-language. Knowledge of the deep structure of different languages is also missing.

In languages with strong affirmatives, imperatives, or commands, for example, learners of English might not be used to responding to the casual commands that exist in the English language. Consideration of gender issues is also too often missing. In some cultures, women do not take the lead when conversation occurs. They wait for the male or the community elder to acknowledge them or to perhaps do all the talking.

Social class and social hierarchy are also not explored as cultural realities. Cognizance of these realities might enlighten instructional designers to realize that language evolves differently within different social cultures and classes. Discourse patterns change among the social classes as well as the information shared. In some cultures, where dominant society members have more opportunities for dialogue and to be articulate, the rest of society might be missing out on these opportunities to assert themselves and might not know how to speak to somebody outside their rank and social class.

Language integration courses usually create familiar scenarios where the language learner speaks to an agent in a government office, an officer in an immigration office, or a clerk in a bank. Sometimes these experiences go even farther by creating language-learning situations in banks, grocery stores, post offices, and rental boards. These are good, actually quite laudable efforts in socializing the newcomer.

However, these formats sorely miss the social survival preparation needed to live in complex urban settings, where immigrants have to fend for themselves on a daily basis. What is also sadly left out is the learner's sense of self and personal identity. The learner's personal experiences and personal progress through the language-learning events are not included as an integral part of their learning.

No one stops to evaluate the learner's self-esteem, or sense of loss as the learner is letting go of the familiar to integrate into the new culture. Sadly too, the learner's past successes in life are almost entirely erased and dismissed, as if immigrants have not led a productive life prior to arriving at the host country.

Insights Are Needed

Drawing from my recent book on cultural awareness, *Raising Multicultural Awareness in Higher Education* (Klein, 2006), I want to share some insights on how to promote cultural sensitivity and how to negotiate a positive working space with second language learners. Depending upon the occupational needs of the learner, when teaching adults, the instructor shapes real-life situations for him/her to resolve and interact with.

For example, a bank clerk who seeks a similar clerical experience in the host country will learn the language better within his/her own playing field—banking

situations. A manufacturing/processing-plant employee will benefit from learning how to give and follow instructions in the manufacturing/processing plant environment. Above all, these learners will also benefit from engaging in the local vernacular/casual discourse so that they can relate better with fellow learners and fellow future workers.

As we move among the various professional arenas, we will find other situational/relational settings from which to create instruction for these adult populations. If we are talking about teaching young/juvenile students, we can do the same thing.

Educational research embraces the ideas of teaching to a person's preferred learning style or learning mode. This is especially true when working with youth, who thrive when the learning relates to themselves at a personal level. Perhaps importing ideas from popular culture, songs, dances, physical expression, art-forms—all drawn from their vernacular/casual dialogue—would benefit and engage them more.

Sadly, too often educators feel that they are short-changing their learners if the learning is enjoyable and casual. They often feel that the serious grammar component is missing. I don't really think so. I believe, and research corroborates this, that we already have a sense of grammar. No matter what the learning situation, our internal grammar allows us to decipher and decode situations, making meaning of what we hear and see.

Another instructionally sound idea for second language instruction is to embed the grammar learning within each learning situation. This can be done through role-play, for example, or any life-like interactive situation. Once the students have been actively engaged, using the vocabulary and the language referents frequently, they can work with the syntax, deep and surface structures, and linguistic components within a non-threatening yet challenging grammar-focused lesson.

From an instructional perspective, it is also important to value the learner's preferred learning and communication styles to support second language learning. The learning environment should contain:

1. Anxiety-free learning situations: This means that the learner does not feel "quizzed" or examined at all times. It also means that the learner can experiment and explore areas he wouldn't do otherwise in a classroom.

These free learning situations could be done through role-play and real-life everyday situations.

2. Respect for the native language and culture: This means that the learner's background is upheld and respected. The instructor's initial job is to find out what the learner brings and to include it within the planning and delivery of instruction.

3. Advocacy for learner's rights: The learner is a person. The learner has a language of his/her own and has led a successful life prior to reaching our shores. Therefore, the learner's skills, background knowledge and first language must be honored and used to his/her benefit. For example, an adult second language learner who was a chartered accountant in his/her own country, should learn within an accountant's working/living scenario so that ultimately he/she can train to become an accountant in the host country. His/her learning experiences should be focused on accounting vocabulary, cultural tips and social mores so that he/she can integrate into the host society more quickly.

4. Opportunities for success: The second language class should be a joy to attend. Learners should be trying new things, experimenting with ideas and scenarios and become acclimated to the host culture and language.

The importance of the communication environment must be understood. Further, it should never be violated. Therefore, it is critical that the instructor: (1) withholds judgment; (2) focuses on process and end results; (3) exercises good listening skills; and (4) sustains a receptive communicative focus. Such steps will contribute to an appropriate sensitivity to the learning needs of ELLs.

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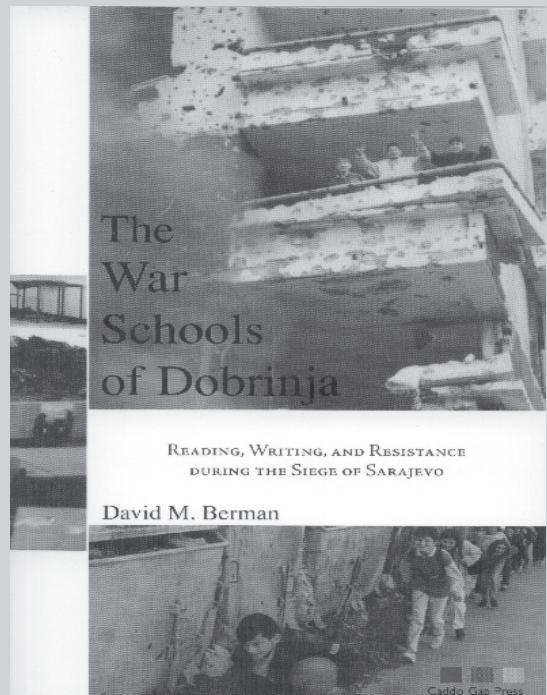
The War Schools of Dobrinja: Reading, Writing, and Resistance during the Siege of Sarajevo

BY DAVID M. BERMAN

*A carefully researched and eloquently written case study
of the war schools of Dobrinja.*

From the Preface by David M. Berman:

This book . . . is difficult to write . . . , perhaps a schizophrenic attempt at best to write an academic analysis of an intensely human experience, of a struggle for survival under the most desperate of conditions, of a struggle to save the children of Dobrinja. In academic terms, this book is a case study of the war schools of Dobrinja set within the background of schooling throughout the besieged city of Sarajevo. In more human terms, this is the story of the teachers and students of Dobrinja, the students who asserted their right to their education and the teachers who answered their call . . .



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